

209TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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THAT WE MAY DWELL IN PERFECT UNITY

Matthew 16: 13-20

Ephesians 4: 1-6

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On the Sunday after I was ordained, June 1963, I was invited to preach in my home church, the Broad Avenue Presbyterian Church in Altoona, Pennsylvania.

I chose for my text the portion of scripture I had been assigned for my senior thesis, the most ambitious academic project I had ever tackled, or have ever since. My professor and thesis advisor was Marcus Barth. I waded through everything anyone ever wrote about that text in antiquity and modernity. I knew the passage in Greek as I have not known anything in Greek since. I explored the text from every perspective – linguistically, theologically, historically, socially, politically.

The text was Matthew 16:13-20, and what I did for that unsuspecting congregation, of course, was take my thesis, bristling with footnotes and scholarly citations and turn it into a sermon.

Fortunately, grace abounds. Everybody seemed pleased. I had not said anything heretical, insofar as anybody knew. I had used a lot of fancy new words, but the church would survive. My old junior high teacher, Magdalene Bair, who used to fill me with fear and trembling, shook my hand and said, “I see you are still talking too fast – and too much!”

There was a festive lunch in our home and afterward my parents and I were alone, finishing up our coffee and my father said one of the most important things anyone has ever said to me. He said, “You told us what everybody in history thought (about Jesus’ question – ‘who do you say that I am?’). Next time you preach on that text,” Dad said, “save some time at the end for what you think.”

He was right, of course. What you and I think and believe about Jesus of Nazareth is the question. Our belief in him, our trust in him, our commitment to follow him, our obedience to him is what allows us to call ourselves Christians.

The church’s affirmation of his Lordship is at the heart of our identity. Jesus Christ is what we are about. Jesus Christ is our truth, our peace; Jesus Christ is all we have to offer one another and the world. Jesus Christ matters, above all else.

I still love that text. I still love that moment when Peter, out of the blue, says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

In my sermon, I focused on that: Jesus' question; Peter's answer. And so, over the centuries we have focused on our Christology – what the church believes about Jesus Christ.

But there is a second part to that important text. It does not get nearly as much attention, particularly in Protestant preaching and scholarship. In fact, a lot of that scholarship argues that the second part of the text must have been added later by church bureaucrats interested in justifying their own existence. There they were, church bureaucrats, leaning over the shoulder of the scribes copying the text, whispering in their ears, "Say, when you get a chance, put something in there about us."

"Who do you say that I am?"

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

"Blessed are you Peter. On this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

My, we wish that weren't in there. We Protestants are uncomfortable with what the Roman Catholic tradition has done with Peter and the keys of the kingdom. And so, we have not spent nearly as much energy on the second part. We are far more interested in Christology than Ecclesiology. When the great creeds have us say, "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church," we say it, of course, but I do believe Presbyterians, generally, cross their fingers when we come to that phrase.

Believe in the church? Believe in the church as a basic item of personal faith? Christology moving smoothly to Ecclesiology? For most of us, that's quite a letdown.

Annie Dillard says it for most of us. Dillard produced an essay on the Gospel of Luke in a volume of contemporary writers on the New Testament and about the end of Luke, she says:

"The skies have scarcely closed around Christ's heels when the story concludes on the disciples. What a pity, that so hard on the heels of Christ come the Christians. There is no breather. The disciples turn into the early Christians between one rushed verse and another. What a dismaying pity, that here come the Christians already, flawed to the core, full of wild ideas and hurried self-importance. Who can believe in the Christians...?" [Incarnation, Contemporary Writers on the New Testament, p. 36/37]

Dillard is right. It is not a pretty picture from the start. The earliest Christian tradition of all is argument, contention, divisiveness. It's why Paul wrote letters. In Galatia, Corinth, Philippi, Ephesus, Christians argued about doctrine, the conduct of sacraments, leadership.

Paul tries scolding the Corinthians; tells them there is a better way to be Christian, in fact, a better way to be human. It's the way of love. But the older Paul becomes, the wiser and more mature, and the more he ponders the unfathomable mystery of God's grace in Jesus Christ ... the bigger and broader his vision of the church becomes.

Near the end of his life, in a Roman jail cell, he writes to the church in Ephesus and now his emphasis is focusing on the unity of that church, the reconciliation between its Jewish and Gentile members. And, get this – the unity of that church would demonstrate to the world the truth of what God had done in Jesus Christ and continued to do in the world through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Is there a more passionate plea than this –

“I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you are called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Ephesians 4:1-3

Is there a more passionate –or relevant – plea in scripture?

You see, Paul's thought has lately taken wing. Now he believes that in Jesus Christ God has started a new creation, a new humanity. In Christ, God – with a plan before the ages – intends to heal divisions, break down walls of hostility, unite all things. Paul soars as he sits in that miserable jail cell. “He is our peace,” he says about Jesus. God's purpose is to bring together the human race, tribes, nations, slaves, free, women, men.

All the scholars agree – whoever wrote this thinks that the church is supposed to show the world what God's new creation looks like. Marcus Barth thinks it was, indeed, Paul and in his classic commentary on Ephesians, he says, about that wonderful admonition, “Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit”, “It is hardly possible to render exactly the urgency contained in the underlying Greek verb. Not only haste and passion, but a full effort is meant, involving will, sentiment, reason, physical strength. Do it now! You are to do it. I mean it!” [*Ephesians*, M. Barth, Vol. II, p. 428]

Barth translated the critical phrase: “Take pains to maintain the unity of the spirit.” It is painful, is it not? It is painful to maintain unity with people you know are wrong and obnoxious on top of it. It is – I propose – a lot more difficult to maintain the unity than to walk away, to destroy it.

Now, wait a minute. Are you proposing that belief in the church is of comparable weight with belief in Jesus Christ and, furthermore, that the church's unity is as important as my individual conclusions about this or that? About COCU or mission budgets, or Amendment B? That's exactly what I'm suggesting and I am convinced that's exactly what the Bible says.

Barth takes it a step further and says that “God's oneness is related directly, causatively, dynamically, effectively, to the unity of the church. Because God is one, God's people are one

and are to live in recognition of unity.” [p. 465]

I love this church of ours and the Reformed tradition that lies behind it. But I do believe it is time for us to repent, to confess that we have not heard God’s summons to unity and reconciliation as clearly as we should.

In the recent issue of Reformed World, Lukas Vischer points out that Reformed churches do not have a particularly good record when it comes to unity. “There is,” he observed, “hardly a country where several Reformed churches do not exist side by side.” Eighty-eight Presbyterian denominations in Korea, for example. I’ve seen it – in Brazil, Chile, -- here in the U.S.A.. Vischer makes this helpful observation: “Reformed churches constantly succumb to the temptation to solve their internal tensions and disagreements by splitting up.” [Mission in Unity, Reformed World, April 1997, p. 33]

One of my favorite poems by one of my favorite poets, the late Phyllis McGinly is “How to Start a War.”

“Said Zwingli to Muntzer ...” [Zwingli and Muntzer were two 16th Century leaders of the Protestant Reformation who disagreed vigorously on the mode of baptism, sprinkling – Zwingli, or total immersion – Muntzer.]

“Said Zwingli to Muntzer
‘I’ll have to be blunt, sir,
I don’t like your version
of Total Immersion.

And since God’s on my side
And I’m on the dry side,
You’d better swing ovah
To me and Jehovah’

Cried Muntzer, ‘It’s schism,
Is infant Baptism!
Since I’ve had a sign, sir,
That God’s will is mine, sir,
Let all men agree
With Jehovah and me,
Or go to Hell, singly,’
Said Muntzer to Zwingli,

As each drew his sword
On the side of the Lord.”

[Phyllis McGinley, *Times Three, Selected Verse*, New York, The Viking Press, 1960, p. 28]

Just a few weeks ago, I was being interviewed by a reporter from one of the major weekly news magazines about Amendment B. After trying everything he could think of to get me to say I thought our church was about to split, he finally said, with a little exasperation, "Look I've talked to both sides. I know what they're saying about each other. You're already two churches. So why don't you just call a meeting, hire a good lawyer, get a divorce, split up the property and move on?"

Bruce Bawer said the same thing in a New York Times Op Ed column on April 5: "American Protestantism is in the midst of a major shift. It is being split into two nearly antithetical religions, both calling themselves Christianity." The battle in the Presbyterian Church, he said, shows that we are already two churches: "a church of law and a church of love." And I was reminded of how many times this year Presbyterians have said to me and written to me long and passionate and sad letters saying, "I have to leave. I cannot stay any longer." I thought about how many people on one side said, "This is a deal breaker, a boundary issue. If this doesn't pass, I'm outa here." And how many now are saying, "I quit, this is it."

Does it matter? Does the unity of the church matter as much as my conscience, my convictions, my opinions which I increasingly believe are God's opinions as well? Yes, it matters. It matters because Paul was right – whether we like it or not – the church shows the world what God's new creation looks like. And if what we show the world is a fractured, broken fragmented mess, that, I believe, is a major failure, a very serious sin.

Beverly Gaventa says this lection should be painful reading for contemporary Christians. "The unity of the church is for its mission and its evangelical credulity." [Texts for Preaching, Year B, 1993]

Our unity is for our evangelical credibility. It doesn't take much experience with our Worldwide Ministries Division to understand the truth of that.

The Presbyterian Churches in Brazil, divided by theology, are moving deliberately closer to one another because they face an evangelical opportunity of enormous dimensions. And they will be more effective when they are one church again.

What is transpiring between Reformed and Lutheran churches here at this General Assembly is important for evangelical reasons.

Where Christianity confronts Islam, our unity is absolutely essential. Nothing ends the dialogue quicker, nothing, I am told, discredits the Gospel more effectively than bickering between Christians.

Peter Kuzmic is the President of Evangelical Seminary in Osijek, Croatia, where Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) mission workers Steve and Michele Kurtz are on the faculty. Peter, who is a Calvinist Pentecostal and one of the leading Missiologists in the world, teaches that missionary effectiveness depends on authenticity and that there is no authenticity in mission that does not reflect not only Christian unity, but that deeper, magnificent new creation, new humanity St. Paul

talked about.

One of Peter's colleagues is a delightful Croatian of Serbian descent, Antol Bolag. Antol was a businessman who decided to give his life to Jesus Christ and now is managing refugee resettlement, sponsored by the Agape Project, which is supported generously by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and One Great Hour of Sharing.

Antol is in charge of rebuilding villages that have been destroyed in the war and resettling refugees. He was working with the mayor – village chief, of a Muslim village that was totally destroyed. Antol was bringing together the materials and resources to rebuild the village, a house at a time. Looking at the plans with the Muslim chief, he noticed that the village Mosque was not on the drawing and he inquired about it. His Muslim colleague was surprised. "You're a Christian, aren't you? You want to convert us. Why are Christians willing to help us rebuild our Mosque?" And Antol Bolag said, "We will help you rebuild your Mosque because we are followers of Jesus, and Jesus told us to love our neighbors, to stand with them. And Jesus told a story one time about a Good Samaritan who helped his neighbor without asking him about his theology."

That's authenticity. That's evangelism and faithfulness. That's what St. Paul meant I believe, about God's new humanity.

Unity is for mission. In our oneness the world sees something of God's new creation.

The late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin's death was an extraordinary event in the life of my city of Chicago. Bernardin's public witness focused on unity – with the Jewish community, with Muslims and Buddhists. His Common Ground initiative was based on the simple premise that Catholics belong to one another in Jesus Christ at a level deeper than their individual opinion and convictions about abortion, women's ordination or homosexuality. People knew that about him and when he died he had arranged for people like me and the Methodist and Episcopal Bishops and Rabbi Schaalman to be on the chancel during his funeral mass. People were fascinated. The whole city stopped in its tracks. Never had Christianity seemed so relevant and winsome, and true.

So what if the Presbyterian Church of ours saw this moment in our long history – our history of contention leading to regular divisions – what if we saw it as a God-given opportunity to make our witness? What if we decided that we have – precisely because the world, for better or worse, is watching us on this issue, watching to see how bad it gets – what if we decided that we have a God-given opportunity to say a word about Jesus Christ – by our unity, by our determined effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit? What if, instead of backing away from one another, we listened carefully to St. Paul's passionate plea – to make every effort, take every pain, leave no stone unturned, spare no effort to maintain the unity?

I think the world might find truth in that and reconciliation and hope.

We come to table this morning, the table of communion. The sacrament is a sign of our oneness

– even when we do not know it or want it. It is a sign this morning of the oneness Jesus Christ gives to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) – all of it – the Presbyterian Lay Committee and Semper Reformada, PFR & PLGC, The Witherspoon Society, Voices of Sophia, Elders at Prayer, The Coalition, Presbyterians Pro-Life and PARO. It is a holy communion because none of us earned our way onto the invitation list. Someone noted recently, we don't get to invite people to this table. God does. Nor do we get to exclude any God invites. Our business is our own table manners.

In a novel, The Clowns of God, Morris West portrays the return of Christ in which he holds a Down Syndrome child, serving her the bread and wine of communion, saying,

“I gave this mite a gift I denied to all of you – eternal innocence. She will never offend me as all of you have done. She will never pervert or destroy the works of my father's hands. She is necessary to you. She will evoke the kindness that will keep you human. She will remind you every day that “I AM WHO I AM.”
[Diane M. Komp, Theology Today, *Hearts Untroubled*, Vol. 45, p. 273-279]

John Calvin was not hesitant to speak his mind, nor was he particularly easy to get along with in academic, theological debate. But he did understand the evangelical importance of our oneness. “I would cross seven oceans,” he wrote, “to advance the cause of Christian unity.”

And attributed to him are, I think, some of the loveliest words ever written and most important. They are in the fourth verse of the hymn with which we began. May they be our prayer.

“Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness
No harshness hast thou and no bitterness
O grant to us the grace we find in thee
That we may dwell in perfect unity.

Amen